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ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests that, on the whole, school discipline problems are not as widespread as the public believes. In 1975 the Bayh report depicted schools as hotbeds of violence and vandalism. Restudies of the Bayh data show the report was skewed toward large schools, where violence is more likely. The National Institute of Education's Safe School study and surveys of California and Indiana educators reveal that most schools have few violence problems and that most discipline problems do not involve violence. New information on the causes of school violence, provided by a New Jersey study and the Safe School data, help identify school, community, and student characteristics that accompany school violence. School characteristics correlated with violence include large size, overcrowding, lack of resources, and particular educational levels (especially junior high school); for communities, they include urban location and low socioeconomic status; and for students, they involve race, gender, and perceptions of disciplinary fairness and consistency. These results imply that school administrators can reduce violence by ensuring clear, firm school governance and by cooperating with teachers in setting school disciplinary policy. (Author/RW)

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RESEARCH ACTION BRIEF

Violence in the Schools: How Much? What to Do?

During the middle 1970s a wave of press reports portrayed the schools as hotbeds of violence. One report that played a major role in creating the press coverage was a 1975 publication with the attention-getting title *Our Nation's Schools—A Report Card: "A" in School Violence and Vandalism.* Popularly referred to as the Bayh report, this product of the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency caught and held the public's attention. Its conclusion was alarming: "What is shockingly apparent . . . is that our school system is facing a crisis of serious dimensions, the solution to which must be found if the system is to survive in a meaningful form."

Such assessments of the schools found a ready audience. In all but one year from 1969 through 1975 the respondents to the Gallup poll of the public's attitudes toward the schools had listed discipline as the schools' number one problem. The Bayh report and the publicity it received transformed the public's concern with discipline into a conviction that the schools were rife with violence. It was forgotten that discipline is a very large and vague category that includes violent and illegal acts but that also encompasses a wide range of behaviors that are neither illegal nor violent, for instance, breaking dress codes, passing notes in class, being absent, and talking back to teachers and administrators. These behaviors can certainly disrupt the learning environment, but they place no one in danger.

It has been several years now since the Bayh report was released. A number of scholars and researchers have reexamined the data on which the report was based. Others have taken a new look at the schools. It is with these newer studies that this paper is concerned. They give a different, perhaps more accurate, view of the condition of American public schools.

How Serious Is the Problem?

Duke and Perry are among those who have found fault with the Bayh report. They do so in an article whose title ("What Happened to the High School Discipline Crisis?") suggests the conclusions they arrived at. While acknowledging that one can disagree over what constitutes a crisis, Duke and Perry use their own work and that of others (the National Institute of Education and Ruchkin) to challenge the validity of the Bayh report and to provide data that tell a different story.

Duke and Perry attack the Bayh report's validity on two grounds. First, the report was based primarily on reports from superintendents of districts with enrollments of over 10,000 students. Because larger districts are generally believed to have more incidents of violence and vandalism than do smaller districts, this sample probably skewed the results. Second, it is unclear whether the data were obtained from records kept by the responding districts for the three-year period covered or from estimates made without the aid of any records. The data, therefore, may be inaccurate.

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Each *Research Action Brief* reports the findings of significant empirical research studies on a topic in educational management. From these findings implications are drawn for the operation of today's schools, thus serving as a guide for enlightened administrative action.

This ***Research Action Brief*** was prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management in cooperation with the National School Boards Association.

To get a more reliable view of the schools, the authors surveyed high school principals in California. Their questionnaire contained five separate indicators of school discipline for the 1975-76 school year: the principal's estimate of the average daily number of disciplinary referrals, the principal's general rating of the school's discipline, the average daily attendance, the average percentage of illegal absences, and the number of suspensions. Information was also collected on school location, number of students, faculty size, and the number of full-time administrators.

The results support the popular notion that discipline problems are associated with school location. Both the administrator's general rating and the number of discipline referrals indicated that large city senior highs had more problems than did others. On the whole, however, only 4 percent of the administrators reported that their schools experienced major problems. Corroborating these findings, the authors point out, are the findings of the National Institute of Health "Safe School" study, which surveyed principals to determine the incidence of crime during the 1975-76 school year. Twenty-five percent of the principals responding said that they had no problem with serious vandalism, personal attacks, and theft; 50 percent reported a small problem; 17 percent reported a moderate problem; and 8 percent a very serious problem.

On the whole, then, Duke and Perry argue that school violence peaked in the years between 1973 and 1975, has leveled off since then, and may be declining along with the size of the cohort presently in the schools. Although some schools do have serious crime problems, violence is not widespread throughout the country's schools, these authors contend; the creation of a crisis atmosphere demoralizes educators whose hard work deserves credit for improving conditions in the schools.

While these studies all seem to agree that the schools are not the hotbed of crime and violence that some reports painted them, there is still some lack of clarity on the issue. Some reports deal with discipline, some with violence, and some with both. One person who has tried to keep these categories straight and who has come up with interesting results is Camp.

Camp did preliminary work to validate a list of 101 student misbehaviors, which he then incorporated into a questionnaire that was sent to a stratified random sample of all secondary teachers and administrators in Indiana. The respondents were asked to indicate which of the misbehaviors they perceived to be discipline problems and, for each of those items, how often they occurred, the level of seriousness of each, and the degree of interference to education caused by each.

The results did vary somewhat between administrators and teachers and among locations (urban, suburban, and rural), but general observations are possible. Among the misbehavior perceived by teachers to be disciplinary problems, Camp notes the predominance of what he terms "general motivational problems of a fairly passive nature." These include ambivalence, clowning, disrespect for school personnel, tardiness, abusing privileges, cheating in class, not paying attention in class, and skipping class—passive behaviors similar to those cited by teachers.

Camp emphasizes that the behaviors that are seen as most serious (involving drugs and violence) and that cause the most interference with education are not the same as those that occur most frequently. He observes that it has been very easy to overstate the condition of the schools: "Perhaps too much written emphasis is placed on the more extreme aspects of student discipline when the most prevalent types of student misbehaving are relatively mild and are in fact more dangerous to teacher morale than to the physical well-being of persons or property, at least in Indiana schools."

Camp's conclusions seem to agree with those advanced earlier. For the most part discipline problems are not problems of violence. It seems that we would do well to ease the crisis atmosphere and take a calmer look at what is known about the occurrence of violence in the schools.

What Creates Violence?

While it seems to be the case that crime and violence are not pandemic in the schools, there remain those schools for which they pose serious problems. Several researchers have examined the characteristics of schools and communities to see if they can be correlated with violent and criminal incidents. This is the first step in changing those characteristics or, if that is not possible, minimizing their effect on the school.

In October 1977 the New Jersey School Boards Association, using information supplied by building principals, constructed an indepth profile of each school in the state in an attempt to identify factors associated with increased violence. School size was an issue at the elementary, middle school/junior high, and senior high levels. Schools that held more than their rated capacity or that exceeded a size limit (800 students at the elementary level and 1,600 at the senior high level) or that had classes of more than twenty-seven students experienced more violence than did others. The use of split sessions was also associated with increased violence. Community characteristics did not produce as consistent correlations as did school characteristics. But urban center communities, communities with low socioeconomic status, and communities experiencing rapid enrollment growth were often associated with increased levels of violence.

Much larger in scope was the National Institute of Education's "Safe School" report referred to earlier. Carried out by order of Congress, the study was intended to address, among other things, the seriousness of crime and the effectiveness of the means of prevention that were being employed. NIE divided the study in three parts: (1) a mail survey of a national sample of more than 4,000 principals in public elementary and secondary schools, (2) a field survey of a representative national sample of 642 schools, and (3) case studies of ten schools that had serious problems and had, in most cases, made dramatic improvements.

To help determine why rates of violence and misbehavior vary among schools, NIE gathered data on both the community and the school. The community factors included size, crime rate, and economic, social, and racial/ethnic composition. The school factors fell into four categories: physical structure, social structure, school functions, and school climate.

Much of the report is given to an accurate description of

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the schools. Among the findings are the following: urban twelve-to-fifteen-year-olds are more likely to be assaulted and robbed in school than out; crime is a more serious problem in secondary than elementary schools; urban schools are more likely to have a serious crime problem than are other schools, but more schools with serious crime problems are found in suburban and rural areas; and personal violence is most likely to happen in urban junior highs.

In profiling victims and offenders, the study concludes that most violent offenses involve parties of the same gender and the same race; that minority students have higher risks for serious attacks and robberies, but, in general, the risk of attack and robbery are the same for minority and white students; and that, in most cases, the risk of attack is greater for a student if he or she is in a school predominately of another race.

The report identified ten characteristics of secondary schools that are associated with low rates of student violence and twelve characteristics associated with low property loss. These characteristics can be broken into those that originate with the neighborhood (and affect the school's student body) and those that are located within the school. What is surprising about the characteristics is how few (seven) focus on the community and its effect on students. The majority of the factors associated with low rates of violence and reduced property loss are located within the school. Schools whose students consider discipline to be fairly administered and say that classrooms are well disciplined, that rules are strictly enforced, and that the principal is strict have low rates of violence. Schools whose students say the classroom is well controlled, whose teachers are not hostile or authoritarian toward students, and whose students value their teachers' opinion have low property loss.

These correlations were not lost on Gottfredson and Daiger. Although they are critical of the Safe School report's methodology, Gottfredson and Daiger acknowledge the vastness of the data collected and chose to reanalyze this evidence in view of other data and by their own methods. Keeping in mind the authors' statements that their study has limitations and was conducted according to a specific model, let us look at some of their conclusions concerning the relationship between the nature of the schools and the rates of teacher and student victimization.

The characteristics of junior high schools that contribute to reduced teacher victimization are greater teaching resources and student perception that rule enforcement is firm and clear. Factors that contribute to increased teacher victimization are larger schools, ambiguous sanctions, more democratic attitudes of teachers, and more punitive attitudes of teachers. In senior high schools greater teacher victimization is associated with larger numbers of different students taught by the average teacher, more ambiguous sanctions, and more punitive attitudes. Less victimization is associated with greater teaching resources, better teacher-administrator cooperation, and more student belief in conventional social rules.

Junior high school students report being victimized more often in schools where teachers are confused about the way school policies are determined and where the average

teacher has more democratic attitudes. Victimization is reported less frequently in schools whose students report that school rules are fair and clear. The only association made at the high school level is that the victimization rate seems to be lower in schools whose students report that school rules are fair and clear.

Implications

All these studies contain a wealth of information, most of which is encouraging. The reports suggest that, on the whole, discipline problems are not as widespread as the public has been lead to believe. Furthermore, violent actions make up only a small subset of discipline problems. This is good news to spread to the public.

The question does, however, arise: What can be done about those schools for which violence is a serious problem? Although there are no easy solutions, the research contains encouragement and guidance for these schools as well. The New Jersey School Boards study, for instance, points out that not all schools operating in the critical zones have the same crime rates. The study advises leaders of schools suffering from violence to look at schools that have the same general characteristics as theirs but that have lower rates of violence and see what those other schools are doing. Implicit here is the assumption that administrators can take steps that make a difference.

That assumption is explicit in both the Safe Schools report and in Gottfredson and Daiger's work. They argue that many of the important characteristics associated with increased rates of violence are within the power of the schools to control.

Gottfredson and Daiger offer numerous suggestions to school leaders. Most of these focus on the school's governance and social climate. They observe that "the more clear, explicit, and firm the running of the school, the less disruption—in terms of both teacher and student victimizations—that the school experiences." This is not a prescription to run a military camp in a school setting. It means that if teachers and administrators work closely together and understand how the school policies are set, they can convey that clarity to the students. Students are then faced with certain and unambiguous responses to their misbehaviors.

The same message is contained in the Safe School report. The study identified school practices that are effective in reducing crime and broke them into six areas: size and impersonality, systematic school discipline, arbitrariness and student frustration, the importance of the school's reward system structure, relevance, and alienation.

The report goes further and identifies the person who needs to make the necessary changes in the schools. "Throughout this analysis, the data point to the principal and the school administration as the key element." The report explains that the principal can develop a coherent discipline policy and provide a system of support and training for teachers. In an atmosphere of cooperation and support, teachers take an active role in school discipline and present students with a system that is perceived as fair, reliable, and based on clear rules.

The Safe School report concludes that "safe schools are characterized by a rational structure of order, with consistent positive incentives and negative sanctions, maintained by effective administrative leadership. They are well-governed schools."

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EA 013 621

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